

NOTE: This is single player canon, where the seasonal giants function differently than in DST.

A living, moving eyeball- sitting atop a dead bone?

Wilson picked it up, of course. It felt warm in his hand, like body heat; a mild pulse of life ran through it.

But surely all the structures necessary for life were not contained in a bone! And the eyeball had tiny horns. How did that work?

He swung the bone through the air, tapped it all over with his fingernails, and wondered if he were going mad.

The eye looked directly into his own, blinked, and looked away. Of course, maybe it only looked like a bone, maybe it was really some kind of shell or exoskeleton that housed a complete creature; or on the other hand the bone might be real but the eyeball might be part of a parasitic creature that had crawled into it and made it into a shell, like a hermit crab. Yes- there were possibilities.

Maybe he was just hallucinating the whole thing. It wouldn't be too surprising- he was hungry and dehydrated and infection could set into that gash in his leg at any time. Of all the images a malfunctioning human brain could have presented him with, a bone with an eyeball on it was really pretty tame! Anyway. What was that noise?

It was coming closer, definitely the sound of an approach. He looked over his shoulder. Some bouncing furry thing, the size of a large dog. It had horns and teeth. That could also be a hallucination but he'd run from it anyway.

He maintained a good speed for about thirty seconds and then his weakened body began to slow down, to heave for air, and to lag closer to the pursuing beast.

There was only so much urging that would have effect on a hunk of flesh that had been mauled, starved and exposed to the elements for weeks. He stumbled and fell to his knees.

The instinct for survival was fascinating. Wilson was going to die in this place sooner or later. He was aching for food, he was chilled to the bone from the rain, he was slower than his predators and had survived yesterday's wolves or dogs or whatever by sheer luck. His leg was hurt and he probably smelled of blood. If he did survive, he had only hell in isolation to look forward to!

Yet he was compelled to live. And whomever- whatever- that horrible cretin that had brought him here was, that Maxwell, he wanted Wilson to die.

He fumbled the spear out of his backpack. It was still crusty with blue blood; he had not had the heart or the strength to try cleaning it after last night's incident. It would still stab.

He struggled to his feet and raised the spear. His pursuer had stopped some feet away. It was just standing there, waiting. It appeared to be panting for breath almost as hard as Wilson was, a pink tongue lolling.

“Don’t come any closer,” Wilson wheezed.

Why was he talking to the thing? It wouldn’t understand him. He kept babbling anyway. “I’ll kill you, I will! I’ve killed things!”

The thing wasn’t attacking him. It had no visible eyes, perhaps it couldn’t see him there. Wait, eyes- the horns on its head. There were similar horns on the eye-bone thing he’d found! It had only showed up when Wilson picked up the bone!

Wilson showed the bone to the creature. “Is this what you want? Eh?”

No reply, of course, just panting. Wilson threw the bone as hard as his aching joints and trembling limbs would allow.

“Fetch!”

The creature bounced off after its bone. Wilson sighed and tucked the spear back into his backpack. It was better, of course, not to fight. It was better to escape. So he turned and stumbled away as quickly as he could. Best to put as much distance between him and that thing as possible!

His leg was sore, but it would only get stiff if he rested it, anyway. He kept going and only slowed to a halt when he noticed that he was surrounded by clusters of red. His mad dash away from the monster had led him to an area of the island that abounded with berry bushes. Ha! Maxwell's attempt to destroy him had only provided him with food!

Wilson shook his fist at the sky and immediately afterwards cleared his throat, shuffled his feet and stuffed his hands into his pockets. There was no call for emotional displays.

The berries appeared to be mildly poisonous. Or maybe ten bushes' worth of them was just too many for a half-starved man.

Wilson shuddered and hugged his knees, scooting a little closer to the fire. The best cure for a stomachache, in his experience, was a blanket, time, and self-pity. Two out of three wasn't bad, really. It would behoove him not to be doubled over with cramps if more of those black toothy monsters showed up, though. Maybe in the future a little more self-control would be in order. He'd just been so hungry...

He jumped. Something was glinting in the grass. Something was looking at him in the grass. The eye-bone, or perhaps another eye-bone just like it. For all he knew the place could be full of them!

Picking that up hadn't worked out so well the first time.

Wilson picked it up. He really wasn't so good at self-control. It just was such a strange little thing... it looked like an ordinary bone, apart from the eyeball on top of it, of course. It was shaped just like a human femur. Articular cartilage and everything. He was dying to crack it open and see if it had marrow.

The eyeball sitting on it blinked at him. Wilson would not crack it open. That would most likely kill it, and whatever the thing was, it wasn't dangerous- it couldn't even move. There was no call for wanton destruction.

He heard a soft sound. Something breathing.

The bone's owner was curled up a little way away from the fire. It must have been there that whole time and Wilson hadn't noticed in the dim light. He was so bad at noticing things.

It wasn't waking up, it hadn't heard him. Wilson could quickly make a torch and escape! There was a bundle of sticks in his backpack, and plenty of grass. He slowly pulled the backpack towards him. As he was easing it open another bolt of pain twisted his guts and he whimpered aloud.

The monster shuddered and got to its feet. It stood there and faced him, its sides moving in and out as it breathed. Wilson didn't move. The creature didn't move.

The fire popped and Wilson jumped. So did the animal. It turned around in a circle and settled back down, facing Wilson and panting. Wilson swallowed and picked up the eye bone. "You want this, huh?"

The animal panted.

Wilson tossed the bone. It flopped through the air and landed next to the animal. It perked up and turned towards the bone, then back towards Wilson. "You don't seem so dangerous," Wilson said. "But I've been wrong about such things. Perhaps I should take my leave."

His stomach rolled. He bit his lip. Truth be told, he didn't really feel like walking. Or standing. Or sitting. Or being conscious.

The animal wasn't built like a predator. No claws, and the teeth were blunter than Wilson had first realized. And what carnivore had horns? Of course, herbivores could still be aggressive- but surely the animal would attack him only if he seemed threatening. He wasn't going to do anything threatening.

Wilson lay down on his side, curling up into the fetal position. If he were disemboweled by that creature, so be it. He probably wouldn't feel the difference anyway.

He woke when he heard the fire go out. It was poor fire safety to sleep next to a fire with no one watching it- or he thought it was, anyway, no one had really ever taught him either way- but he couldn't bear to sleep without one. He'd heard something moving out there in that darkness before. Someone screaming.

It was dawn now and there was enough light to see by. There was no one out there. It seemed impossible that someone had ever been out there, but he knew what he'd heard. And felt. So many things here were impossible but they happened.

Like that shaggy little animal he'd come across yesterday. It was still there. It had woken up and was panting at him.

Wilson got to his feet and stretched. He felt fine, apart from the general battering he'd taken over the past few weeks. The berries must not be poisonous. He'd just overindulged.

He shouldered the backpack and tested his wounded leg. Stiff, naturally, after a night of inactivity, but usable. No infection or anything of the sort.

That animal was just sitting there. He cleared his throat. "Well, goodbye, then," he said, with an awkward smile. Why was he smiling at the thing? Why was he talking to it? This place did things to a person.

He turned his back on the little animal and walked away briskly, or as briskly as one could with a slight limp. A little way away he slowed down and looked back

The fluffy little thing was still just sitting there. It seemed so calm. It seemed to want to stay near that bone, since it hadn't moved and all. Wilson would make a mental note of that. Perhaps the creature could be coaxed to move by moving the bone. He didn't know why he'd need to do that, but it was worth remembering.

Wilson flipped over the trap. Inside was a squirming rabbit. It looked distressed.

“Well, imagine how I feel,” Wilson told it. “I’ve eaten three of your kind today and I’m still hungry! What’s wrong with you?” He’d had rabbit at Cousin Fred’s hunting parties. One or two rabbits had fed Wilson, Fred, whoever Fred’s date was, whoever Wilson’s date had been assigned to be, and often one of Fred’s obnoxious friends. That was a far cry from three rabbits- soon to be four- failing to sustain one smallish man. Of course, those rabbits had been served with potatoes- potatoes with butter- and sometimes a ham.

“I could kill for some bacon,” he said to himself as he dispatched the rabbit. Quite literally he could... there were the pig men. But they used language! And tools! And they had houses! But people could starve on a diet of lean meat. But eating a bipedal creature with intelligence was near to cannibalism. Besides, they looked like pigs (fat, meaty pigs)- but he didn’t know that they would actually have meat on them that would taste like bacon. Appearances could be deceiving. And it would sort of be murder.

“It’s a dilemma,” he said to the dead rabbit.

It would be nice to get back to camp before dark so he could cook the rabbit in the cook pot but he didn't really expect to make it all the way there in this heat, and wasn't surprised when he had to stop and make a cold fire. It was getting close to dusk anyway. Making a hot fire would probably make him pass out and he couldn't cook over a cold one. After a moment of debate he flayed the rabbit and started eating it raw. Not very tasty, but at least it was wetter this way, and he didn't think he was drinking enough water...

Hmm, hold on. His surroundings didn't look familiar.

Wilson consulted his map, which was just a rough charcoal sketch on a piece of wood. He appeared to have sweated through his clothes onto it, rendering it smeary and useless. Gross. He chucked it in the fire.

He knew enough to know he'd taken a wrong turn. This island was short on landmarks, making it easy to take a wrong turn. But he wasn't anywhere dangerous! He was just in the deciduous forest, and nothing too terrible lived there apart from the occasional spider. And if there were spiders nearby, he would have heard them by now. Safe enough to roll out his grass mat and try to get some sleep.

Before lying down he knelt on the mat and listened to his surroundings. He heard no barking, just crickets, an occasional owl, and... padding footsteps.

Wilson pulled out his spear and sat waiting. Something appeared in the light of his fire. Something furry.

"Oh, uh, hello," Wilson told it. "I haven't seen you in a while." It panted at him. Wilson looked around and noted the eye bone nearby, gleaming in the firelight. "I'm not learning to be observant very quickly," he said to himself.

The shaggy little creature was obviously quite docile. It radiated calm. There seemed to be no reason now to have ever been frightened of the animal, let alone to threaten the poor thing with a spear! Of course he had more experience now telling peaceful animals from evil ones, but not much more.

It would seem that the animal really didn't like to leave the bone. And it seemed incapable or unwilling to pick up the bone in its mouth and move it itself. The ground was trampled all around the area, indicating the animal stayed there, and yet, there was no sign of droppings. Perhaps it buried its scat. Though there was no sign of anything being buried, either- apart from the disturbed earth over the rabbit carcass that Wilson himself had buried.

He dug it up. "You want this?" The animal must have drawn near for a reason. It was probably hungry. Maybe it was lost, too. Wilson hadn't seen any others of its species.

Wilson picked a bit of gristle off the carcass that he himself had been unable to eat. He was learning to consume all sorts of noxious things, but he must be more finicky at heart than Robinson Crusoe or his ilk because he had been unable to eat certain bits of the animal that he knew to be, in theory, edible. Eyeballs, for example. And the one time he tried to eat the intestines he'd almost thrown up. If he ever got back to civilization, he would perhaps keep all that to himself.

He approached the animal. It backed away. Why, it was afraid of him! It was afraid of him? And yet it must be curious about him, because it had come closer. It just didn't want to be *too* close.

The strange beast panted up at him. It looked so soft and shaggy. Top-heavy, with those horns and its little stumpy legs. It obviously couldn't see well, its eyes weren't even visible. "Poor little guy," Wilson said. "Don't worry, I won't hurt you."

He showed it his empty hands with fingers splayed, although it was doubtful that the creature would understand the gesture even if it could see- and he wasn't entirely certain it could. He dug for a better piece of meat to give it. There really wasn't much left. He'd consumed everything but the eyes and bowels. He'd even cracked open the larger of the rabbit's bones and sucked out the marrow.

Bones! This creature liked bones. Wilson picked off a tiny rib and held it out. "Are you hungry?" The creature seemed hesitant. "You may have it," Wilson said. Of course the thing couldn't understand him, but animals were supposed to react to the tone of one's voice if one spoke kindly-

Suddenly, the creature opened its mouth. Or rather, its upper jaw flipped upright like it was on a hinge, revealing an enormous gaping maw filled with teeth!

Wilson flinched, but, well, he had been offering to feed it, so he oughtn't to take this as a sign of aggression or anything of the sort. He flicked the rib into the creature's mouth and backed away. The jaw flipped back down.

Wilson sat on the straw mat. The creature lay down. It had no real face to speak of but he imagined it looked satisfied. "Good night," he said.

When he awoke the furball was still there. It didn't leave the eye bone, right. Hmm. Perhaps it could not leave its bone... if it could not, then Wilson had stranded it here. Without accessible food and without others of its kind! "I didn't mean to inflict a condition of stranded starvation on anyone. Or any... thing."

Wilson picked up the bone. "Let's find you a better spot, eh?" Wilson led the bouncy creature along the path back towards his camp. In a distressingly short time he was rather overcome by heat and had to lie down under a tree. This heavy backpack really wasn't helping.

The creature stood over him and panted. "You must be hotter than I am," he said. "All that fur." He reached out and touched the fur, with no other excuse than that he was feeling light-headed. It was coarse and long. Felt like the bear rug in Fred's house.

The animal reacted to the contact by flipping its mouth open. Wilson sat up and leaned forward. That bone he'd given the creature was still sitting there in its mouth. Or the large, dry, padded cavern that served it for a mouth. Its tongue was just tacked on in front. There was no root.

"What on Earth?" Wilson muttered. He reached in and patted the bottom of the animal's mouth. Warm and soft.

The beast seemed not at all distressed to have Wilson's arm inside it. Wilson took out the dried rabbit bone and flipped it into the grass. The strange animal closed its... mouth...? and panted happily.

Wilson put the eye bone inside the creature's mouth and took it back out. The creature showed no reaction either way "Huh," said Wilson.

The animal showed no signs of recognizing the prairie, the meadows, the woods, or the outskirts of the marsh, and no inclination to settle down in any of those places.

Wilson found a berry bush that hadn't yet shriveled up or been harvested and ate a couple of the sad, dry fruits. They were chewy and sour. He'd save the rest and try to make them more palatable with the cook pot.

He flicked one of the berries into the fuzzball's open mouth. "Maybe you simply don't like bones," he mused. "To be fair, I don't eat those either."

There was no reply, of course.

The heat made frogs sluggish. Wilson easily trapped one by the pond and dispatched it. Tucking the oversized amphibian under his arm, he made his way back to camp.

The strange furry animal bounced along beside him. It was easy to get the impression that it liked him, somewhat, but no, he was well aware it was only following the bone.

A nice cold fire was in order and a bit to drink. He had stored lots of water during the torrential spring just in case, and "just in case" was now, because all the glaciers had melted and dried up and the ponds were half-full and muddy.

"That's better," he said, after he'd slaked his thirst and cooled off a bit. He looked back at his new compatriot. The fuzzball had found the place by the fire pit where repeated sitting and sleeping had worn a small hollow in the shape of Wilson's curled-up body, and was lying in it. It looked like it was smiling, the way a panting dog looked like it was smiling.

"That's not your habitat," said Wilson. "I can't feed you."

The animal kept on panting and smiling. It didn't seem to do much else.

Wilson sighed. He checked inside the strange animal's mouth. It hadn't swallowed the berry or made any sort of attempt to digest it. After a moment of internal debate Wilson removed the berry and ate it himself.

He placed a few small pebbles, bits of wood and flower petals into the animal's mouth and observed. He saw no change in behavior. Wilson checked the items after a minute or two. None had been eaten. He removed the items.

"What do you eat?" he asked aloud. He trickled in a few drops of precious water, waited, and checked. The water hadn't been swallowed or absorbed.

Wilson did a cursory examination of the creature. He found no pulse and no sign of internal organs. It was just like an empty box on legs. And yet it was breathing. And warm. And furry.

Wilson took a step back from the creature. His food was done. He retrieved it from the cook pot and choked it down. Everything he ate was so unsatisfying lately. Maybe it was the heat. He'd used to somewhat enjoy frog legs once he got past the initial disgust. "Is that it?" he asked the bizarre anomaly sitting by the fire. "You're too hot to eat anything, under all of that fur? Yes, that must be it, poor creature..."

Why it didn't drink, though, that was still open for debate. It was a confusing creature, but it certainly wasn't the strangest thing Wilson had seen in this place. It was clearly friendly, or at least neutral. He sat down beside it.

There were more things he could do, more refinements to camp and such, but he was awfully tired. Maybe he'd just sit for a while...

The animal put its stumpy paw on his knee. "Well, we'd better find somewhere else for you to stay before you decide you want to eat again. I don't have much to share," said Wilson. "I'm not even feeding myself very well. I think I need more vegetables, or something."

The animal didn't seem bothered by that at all. "Too much lean meat, perhaps. I've heard that can be a problem," he mused.

"Darwin wrote on it. I've probably been here long enough for that to be a problem. I think they call it rabbit starvation."

Somehow, he doubted the funny creature had heard of rabbit starvation. "You don't even understand English." Wilson sighed and shut his eyes.

Something cold and wet was on his face! He was going to be eaten alive before he could fight back!

No, false alarm, it was just the furry thing that had been sharing his camp for the past few days. It had been licking his face. Wilson took his hand off of his spear he slept next to. "This better be important!" he snapped.

He glanced over the camp. Nothing looked out of place. There was no emergency, the stinker had just wanted to wake him up.

Oh, but it was silly and unfair to attribute cruel motives to the little creature. It didn't know that Wilson happened to feel excruciatingly rotten at the moment. It hadn't just decided to harass him and interrupt his sleep, it was a dumb animal. "Are you finally hungry?" he asked. He had placed all sorts of substances inside the creature's inner cavity, including live rabbits- hypothesizing that perhaps the creature fed on live animals like some sort of Venus flytrap- but nothing had been digested. Also, it never excreted anything.

It had never licked his face before... "I don't suppose you want to eat me." That didn't seem terribly plausible. Wilson had had his arms inside the thing's mouth so many times, why hadn't it bitten him? He had even fallen inside the cavity once, and the creature had calmly waited while he frantically extricated himself.

“Well then,” he asked, “what is it?” How long had he been sleeping, anyway? The sun was high overhead. He must have been unconscious for hours and hours and the cold fire had gone out. But he didn’t feel hot. And he wasn’t sweating. Yet, it was hot! It had to be. He must have heatstroke. This could be dangerous. Perhaps it was good that the shaggy beast had woken him up. If Wilson didn’t know better, he would wonder if his rust-colored campmate had wanted to revive him, or-

Or-

A sound, a low growl, seemingly coming from nowhere.

“What was that?” He picked up the spear and stood. Another growl. It was so loud that it reverberated through the ground and he felt the vibrations in his legs and even in his chest. “That sounds awfully big.” His little friend had been warning him, hadn’t it? Or just trampling him in agitation, which had had the same effect. Wilson absent-mindedly patted it and looked around for the source of the noise.

An acrid smell filled the air. Smoke. Wilson’s mouth went dry. To the east was a flickering light. Another fire. Looked like a doozy. Great.

Something was drifting through the flames. A giant... reptilian thing. It was spitting fire. Well, how interesting! That was certainly something he hadn’t seen before!

The flames were coming closer. Wilson bolted.

It was far too hot to run and he was far too weak. He collapsed after what seemed a very short time, heaving for breath, vision graying over. He would have known he couldn't flee if he'd thought about it at all but the panic response had been too strong- not that it mattered, there was nothing else he could do.

He had the eye bone in his pocket at all times. The little fuzzball had come with him and now it started to lick his face again. He tried to get up again and fell back down. It was so hot. "I can't," he said. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was about to be dead. He couldn't even move- it wasn't a question of effort, it was like his limbs weren't connected to his brain. He couldn't reach them at all.

He felt no discomfort, no pain, just a certain dreaminess- he'd felt like this once before and had woken up with a resuscitator being used on him. No resuscitator here. Well, well, so the end had at last come! Wilson would have expected to curse and rail at his death a bit, if anyone had asked how he might feel about the matter when it came... but now he did not rage in the slightest. No call for that, he had done his best, and he'd survived much longer than anyone could reasonably have expected him to. He let out one last breath...

Then there was a flash of light and a feeling of tremendous pressure, and he was somewhere else entirely!

He was sitting on a bunch of shards of rocks, and some wooden floorboards. There was a rush of something in his chest for a moment, a not-unpleasant feeling like an electric burst, and then it faded and he did feel unpleasant.

He blinked at his surroundings. They were very much there. He was very much conscious. Wilson stood on shaky legs and inspected himself for damage. Nothing. But he had died. But he was still on the island which meant- which meant the island was the afterlife? The island was forever?

No no no, talk about jumping to conclusions! No. It couldn't be.

He was surrounded by reeking pig heads on sticks. They weren't decayed to skulls the way they had been the last time he'd seen them, though, which meant, he realized, that the pigs or somebody must replace them every so often.

He supported himself on one of the pig head stakes and breathed rapidly through his mouth. The stench and the strangeness were equally overpowering and after a brief struggle he doubled over and vomited bile. "Ew..." He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve and sweated.

It was a different time of day than it had been when he'd passed out- or passed away- whichever. The sunlight was dimmer than he recalled. He would probably feel quite a bit better if he stopped hanging out right in the middle of a cloud of decay-smell. He walked away, forcing himself to move slowly even though he had an irrational urge to bolt. Where would he run to? What would he be running from?

Where was he walking to, for that matter? Back to camp, he supposed. After a bit of confused walking it occurred to him that he really should have keeled over from the heat by now. It was cooler than it had been in months. Or was this heatstroke again?

No, there was a nice breeze, and little spots of cold were hitting his arms and face. It was raining.

Wilson tipped his head back and put his tongue out. To think that back in spring he had only wanted it to stop raining! He had known so little about the true harshness of the elements then. Soon his hair was a heavy wet mop on his head, which was unpleasant but preferable to feeling as if he'd been shut up in an oven. He ought to hurry back to camp and pull out the rain-catcher.

His footsteps slowed. Ah, yes. There was a monster back at camp.

Wilson approached cautiously. There was no sign of the giant thing he'd seen in the flames, it seemed to be gone. Or it had been imaginary. Whichever. His camp was also gone. Burned to ashes.

Wilson sat down in the middle of the gray powder, staring at nothing. He ought to be dead, something had gone wrong, that was all, so maybe he ought to rectify the matter. Slit his wrists. Not really, of course, just a little a joke, a little joke inside his head because no one was here to hear a little joke, so he would also have to be the one to laugh at it. "Ha!" And something laughed with him, though not out loud.

Wilson jumped to his feet. "You!" His hands balled into fists. He forgot sometimes that all of this misery was manufactured, but that laugh had really brought it home. "You arrogant, scheming, con artist! You think this is what will break me? You- you- you're not going to manage it!" Wilson began to quickly gather the few items that were still useful, loading them up into his pockets and the backpack that had somehow survived. He was breathing hard through his clenched teeth the whole time. Maxwell thought this was funny. Oh, yes, how hilarious. "See how funny it is when I- when I-" At the moment, there was no way to finish that. There wasn't a clear way to get back at Maxwell yet. But he'd find one. Would he ever.

"Don't count me out just yet, pal," he spat.

The destruction wasn't as bad as it had first appeared. The fire pit was still intact. So was the science machine under its layer of ash, and the cook pot, which was the most important thing, really. He could stay here and rebuild on the rubble. And he had been carrying quite a few useful items when he had- well, before. He should go and see what had happened with that. Those things had been left quite a way from the scene of the fire and ought to be intact.

Wilson took a deep breath, inhaled a lot of ash by accident, coughed for a while, and headed off to sort out the matter of his corpse.

The first thing he saw while approaching the area was the funny, furry animal that had been tagging around with him for the last few days. The bone must have been dropped on the ground around here.

The thing jumped on him and knocked him flat on his butt. Wilson yelped.

The creature wriggled in his arms, licking his face. It pawed at his chest and panted and squirmed as if it would be frantically wagging its tail, if it had one. Wilson wrapped his arms around the furry body and let it slobber on him for a while. The creature huffed hot breath onto him.

It was crazy to think that this bizarre animal with its lack of internal structures and its dubious biology, on this evil island, could *like* him, could be greeting him with the wild affection of a dog for its master. There must be some other reason for what it was doing. Maxwell would not provide Wilson with a friend.

But it felt good to think he was liked by something.

It felt really good.

He buried his face into the thick fur. The critter quit squirming, became soft and calm and snuggled into Wilson's chest. Wilson combed its long hair with his fingers.

Sometime later he gently set the little guy down on the ground and got up to check around for his own dead body.

There was no body, though. Just a skeleton. And it was most definitely Wilson's skeleton. It was the right height, age, and sex, and it was missing the correct number of ribs on the left side.

He was torn between the desire to examine the bones and a growing nausea that compelled him to look away. Well, he was a scientist, and it was just a skeleton! He crouched down and poked at it for a little bit. It certainly looked like it ought to be Wilson's skeleton, but someone with Maxwell's power could have faked it. And Wilson's skeleton was inside Wilson! Wasn't it? Yes, it was, it wasn't as if he had turned to boneless jelly.

“Not buying it,” he muttered aloud. He set about gathering his things. The loaded-down backpack was almost too much to carry, but he only had a short walk to camp. He set off, eye bone in pocket so the fuzzy critter would follow him. The little guy really needed a name. Wilson couldn’t just keep calling it “Hey, you” if he was planning to be near it for any length of time. Of course he couldn’t just keep it forever, it was a bizarre wild animal, and when he eventually found its habitat it would be goodbye. But until then-

The animal was pawing his leg. Wilson stopped.

“Yes, what?” he asked the animal. Wait, why was he doing what it wanted? It couldn’t speak, and he needed to get this stuff back to camp. The backpack straps were about to cut off his arms at the shoulders from the weight and the load itself had shifted most painfully onto the sunken side of his back- a position it kept rolling back to no matter how many times he pushed it over onto the right side.

The animal flipped its mouth open.

“I still don’t know what you eat,” Wilson said, and he kept walking.

The animal appeared in front of his legs, blocking his progress. It opened its mouth.

“I cannot feed you! I have failed to find out what you eat!”

The creature panted anxiously and pawed at his shins.

“No!” Wilson snapped. It wasn’t hot enough to kill anymore but it was too hot to carry a load that was much too heavy. He wondered if it was even safe to be carting this around. Dr. Graham had assured him that he would be able to work and carry things and such but the specific question of being stranded in the wilderness and forced to wear an extremely heavy backpack sitting right on the old surgery site- that hadn’t come up. It was beginning to hurt quite a lot. Maybe he should make two trips-

The creature hopped up on its back legs and pawed at his backpack straps. Then it got back down on all fours and opened its maw again.

“What, this?” Wilson took off the backpack and dropped it into the creature’s mouth. As soon as he did so he regretted it. What a petty and spiteful thing to do, the poor animal, what if he’d killed it?

He hadn’t killed it. The creature closed its mouth, hopped around energetically as if it wasn’t carrying anything at all, panted, and bounced off in the direction of camp. It could only get a few feet away from the bone, at which point it stopped and turned towards Wilson.

Wilson cleared his throat. “Thank you?”

The critter looked like it was smiling.

Back at camp, it turned to him and opened its mouth. The backpack was unharmed.

Wilson pulled out the backpack and dropped it on the ground. He sized up his new friend. "Otto von Chesterfield, Esq.," he decided. "Chester, for short." He sat down and stroked the long fur. Chester smiled.

"Come along, Chester!"

Chester could not do otherwise, if he were holding the bone, so the command was hardly necessary. It was nice to have someone to talk to, was all.

The marsh wasn't so bad as he originally feared, not if he stayed on the path and got out before dusk. And he'd gathered so many reeds, which he could use to make a rough approximation of paper, so he could take real notes! He didn't know how or why he knew reeds could be made into paper, exactly; paper-making had never been a subject of his in school or anything he was interested in studying independently, not by a long shot. But he wanted the paper so he would just go with it.

And Chester was happy to carry the reeds. "Aren't you, boy?" Wilson patted him between the horns. Chester's tongue lolled. Chester did not judge one for speaking an incomplete thought aloud. Or not wanting to speak at all, for that matter, or making a joke that didn't land, or looking gloomy at an inappropriate time. To think that Wilson had ever thought him hostile, or unintelligent. Chester was such a dear little creature.

“That’s enough for today, I think. It’s too close to dusk for me to care to wander all around looking for more-”

He looked up and saw a whole lot of reeds all in one place. “Although I think I could take a second out to get those!”

If Wilson had stopped to think he would most likely have been intellectually capable of realizing that neatly arranged reeds in a convenient rectangular field were a bit suspect. But lately the weather had turned beautiful, and then he had discovered the soft, furry elephant animals that could be tracked, that traveled alone and were dispatched with relative ease and were full of red meat and fat, and he had been eating better and sleeping better and generally feeling better and that could make a person cocky.

Anyway he went right to the reeds and was even surprised when a tentacle reared up to attack him- followed by two more on each side. Panic took over and directed him to scramble away. He slipped in the mud, fell, got up and ran back to the path, where he found himself covered in filth, bleeding badly from the shoulder, and quite alone.

“Chester?” He looked back. Chester had followed Wilson to the reeds as of course he had, he was loyal, and Wilson had the eye bone, and the obedient little thing had gotten pinned between two tentacles which were taking turns destroying him.

Wilson ran back over, seized the furry body and began to pull it backwards until one of the monsters clocked him in the face so hard that he lost his grip and fell on his back.

He sat up and saw it was too late because loyal Chester's body had been literally ripped to pieces, legs splayed in every direction, the reeds he had been storing spilling out as if he'd been disemboweled-

"No, no, no," he babbled. "No, Chester-"

Another tentacle snapped towards him and in cowardice he bolted. Not that there was anything more he could do.

Once back on the path he turned and looked back. Poor thing. Poor, poor thing.

Wait!

Wilson hastened to the nearest bizarre black stone. There was one in the marsh, not far away.

Chester was not there. Whatever terrifying force allowed those stones to save a man from death did not work on a dog, or a sort of dog-like thing.

Wilson was still holding the eye bone but the eye had closed in death. He studied it. Chester had put in loyal service, he deserved a proper funeral. Just a quick one. It was getting dark, but he had time for a swift funeral.

Wilson selected a nice spot in a meadow, shady and cool under a tree, and buried the eye bone. He stuck a piece of wood in the dirt as a grave marker and knelt beside the patch of fresh earth. Maybe it was a bit silly, but people buried their canine companions, didn't they? And Chester had been as good as any dog, hadn't he?

“Here lies Otto von Chesterfield, Esquire,” he said aloud.
“Loyal companion, bizarre biological anomaly, and, er-”

There was a lump in his throat. *Stiff upper lip, boy*, he told himself. “Anyway, Chester was a good boy, and- taken from us too soon by-”

Taken from the world too soon by Wilson’s carelessness and bad pet ownership. Wilson cleared his throat. “Anway, he was, uh... a helpful kind of guy, and-” Chester wouldn’t be there anymore. Chester would never be there anymore, that was how death worked, Wilson would be completely alone again. And it was all because Wilson had repaid Chester’s loyalty and friendship by just letting him run into a biological minefield-Oh, why shouldn’t he cry? There was no one around to witness the pitiful sight of a grown man weeping over the death of some kind of furry living box, and swallowing his emotions was giving him a stomachache. Besides, Chester deserved a bit of grief.

Wilson had not taken into account that his cheek had been flayed open and that tears were salty. “Ow-”

He sat on his heels and whimpered into the crook of his arm like a boy. After a moment or so of this he grew silent and still, a vole under the shadow of a hawk. He was being watched. Maxwell was here to see his most emotionally vulnerable moments, of course, and Maxwell quite enjoyed it. Wilson didn’t consider Maxwell human and was generally able to ignore him, but-Maxwell spoke.

(Isn't this sad. I haven't seen anything so tragic since the bandits died at the end of The Great Train Robbery.)

Wilson turned, teeth clenched. He glared up into the sky but Maxwell probably wasn't up there, come to think of it. Wilson glared at the ground. Maybe Maxwell wasn't there either. Darn it, where should he glare? He turned away with a hmph. "Kindly keep your comments to yourself, pal." In his head, it had been a haughty and dismissive statement, but when he said it aloud it sounded thin and trembling.

(So you can hear me, can you?)

"Of course I can hear you." And now his hatred leached into his tone, making it venomous. "I just don't often find you worthy of reply."

(Consider me duly chastised.)

Jaw clenched, Wilson got to his feet and dusted himself off.

This explained everything. Maxwell had provided him with a genuinely good friend so that Maxwell could destroy him emotionally by killing that friend- or more accurately, giving Wilson the opportunity to get him killed. Wilson would not cry for that demon's twisted satisfaction!

His resolve lasted until that night, when there was no warm furry body to lie next to and he went into near-hysterics, curled into a ball and clutching his sides in convulsive sobbing. This was a bit of an overreaction, he hadn't cried like this since Mother had been taken away to the asylum, and then the alienists in attendance had said that if he could not calm down he would be considered for admittance himself. So this behavior was not sane, and he should stop.

Of course he should stop, but that didn't mean he could stop. There was no shot of whiskey or dose of Veronal to calm him down here, for one thing. And once he started thinking about never seeing Chester again he thought about all sorts of things- like being cut off from human society forever, and never making that great discovery that would benefit humanity, and never seeing his family no not even the crotchety old uncles he hadn't liked, and how he'd never appreciated people being around when he had them.

And then he thought about Mother sitting in the asylum wondering why he never visited and thinking he had just deserted her because he didn't like hospitals, and Fred waiting and waiting to see if Wilson would turn up only for him never to turn up and possibly even funding a fruitless search for him, and even little childish things like never having an Oreo cookie again. In the end he only stopped having hysterics when he passed out from exhaustion after midnight, and he woke up distinctly out of sorts.

Maxwell dared to speak to him again while he was eating a tasteless breakfast of slimy carrots by the fire.

(Say, pal, looks like you're not doing so great.)

Wilson flicked an obscene gesture at his deserted surroundings, which only made him more irritable, because now Maxwell had reduced him to the level of someone who made obscene gestures at nothing. Well, maybe Maxwell could make him into a ranting savage, but Maxwell couldn't do what he really wanted. He couldn't kill Wilson. And he couldn't break his spirit, no matter how many hysterics happened. So there.

"Hey!"

Wilson jumped and nearly dropped the jerky he was holding. The woman, Willow, had appeared on the other side of the fire pit, her excited breaths making little clouds in the air and her eyes bright. A real human standing there, a human with a soft human face, and lively human eyes, and gesturing five-fingered hands.

"I found something weird. Come look!" she said.

He shook himself out of his reverie. She couldn't like to be gawked at every single time she came upon him unawares. "Yes?" he said, setting down his food and standing up.

“This way, this way.” She led him through crunching snow that always did overspill into his shoes no matter how he tried to cover them up with rabbit skins. He watched her bouncing pigtails. Human hair, carefully parted and tied up with ribbons and dexterous fingers. She had tucked a little piece of flint into the brim of her makeshift hat for an emergency tool. Tool use. Very human.

Right, he shouldn’t stare. It was rude and weird. It was just nice to have another person around. He wasn’t used to it.

Willow had stopped walking. They’d come to a meadow, where an orange-brown shape was standing.

Wilson rubbed his eyes and blinked. The shape stayed where it was.

The other human turned to him. “What is that thing, Mr. Scientist? It’s just like, a hopping he-”

“Chester?” Chester turned at the sound of his name. But it couldn’t be Chester. But it was Chester. He had been resurrected somehow, like them, and he’d gone to the bone, which was buried. But Wilson had visited the bone and Chester hadn’t been there. Perhaps the process had taken longer with him than with people. Anyway, Wilson ran to him, slipped in the snow, fell, got up, kept running and flung himself onto Chester’s furry body.

Chester slobbered lovingly on Wilson’s exposed cheeks and nose. He’d forgiven Wilson entirely for leading him to his death earlier and then leaving him stranded here. What a kind, upstanding gentleman of a monster.

“Chester, Chester! Aww, you’re such a good boy, yes you are!”

He kissed the little creature between its horns, getting a mouthful of long, cold, wet, not-so-clean fur. Crunching footsteps. Willow was standing near him. Why, he must look utterly ridiculous! She had already caught him rocking back and forth, talking to himself, displaying odd or inappropriate emotions, he would probably alienate her eventually.

He looked up at her. She looked surprised. And then, faintly amused. “Is he your friend?”

“Yes,” Wilson said.

“What does he eat?”

“Nothing. He doesn’t eat anything at all! And he carries items for people. He’s really useful,” he said, realizing that he was basically asking ‘can I keep him?’ to someone he barely knew who seemed to be a couple years younger than himself. Well, he was living at her camp at the moment, so it was only polite.

“He follows this strange bone thing. Here, help me dig it up.”

Without waiting for her help he began to scrabble at the dirt with his bare hands. The ground was hard but he hadn’t buried it very deep, so he was soon holding it and carefully cleaning off the dirt.

Willow leaned over his shoulder. “What in the world. I think it’s staring at me.”

Well yes the eye-bone could be unsettling. “I’ll keep it with me, you won’t have to see it.”

“Did you bury it?”

“Yes.”

“Because it’s creepy?”

“No, um, I thought he was- dead.” His voice choked up a little. He cleared his throat and patted Chester.

Willow looked him over. “Yeah, that can happen here I guess! Your fuzzy friend looks kinda cold, maybe we should take him back to camp and warm him up with a nice fire.”

The lady always seemed to want to make a nice fire. Well, it was quite cold! “That sounds lovely!” He picked up the eye bone and turned to Chester. “C’mon, boy. Let’s go home.”

Chester smiled.